U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Serbia

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports - 2008
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Part 1

The Republic of Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with approximately 7.5 million inhabitants. Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica has led the coalition government since 2004. Boris Tadic was reelected president in February 2008 elections that observers deemed essentially in line with international standards. In January 2007 voters elected a new parliament, with some minority ethnic parties gaining seats for the first time. The government generally respects the human rights of its citizens and continues efforts to address human rights concerns; however, numerous problems persist. These include: corruption in the police and the judiciary; inefficient and lengthy trials; government failure to apprehend fugitive war crimes suspects under indictment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), specifically Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic; harassment of journalists, human rights workers, and others critical of the government; limitations on freedom of speech and religion; societal intolerance and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Roma; presence of large numbers of refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo; violence against women and children; and trafficking in persons.

Part 2

The U.S. government's chief priority is to help Serbia become a stable, democratic, and prosperous Euro-Atlantic partner. Like most other transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Serbia faces the challenges of fighting corruption and organized crime, building good governance, and protecting its minorities and other vulnerable populations. Additionally, it must cope with the difficult issues related to the final demise of Yugoslavia--including the independence of Kosovo, trials of war criminals, and rebuilding ties with neighbors who were enemies in the recent past. On Kosovo, the United States will encourage Serbia to engage constructively on post-independence issues and to rebuff a nationalist backlash that could pull Serbia away from Euro-Atlantic integration. The challenge for the United States is to remain realistic but to stay committed to serving as a catalyst for positive change.

One of the main U.S. goals is to help the country come to terms with its role in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, which substantially hindered progress toward securing Serbia's place in the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Through a range of assistance activities, the United States continues to reform and strengthen democratic institutions that will enhance the country's stability. U.S. programs focus on developing judicial independence and efficiency, improving parliamentary oversight and organizational planning, building capacity among democratic parties, and supporting civil society and the media. The U.S. government will continue to work toward strengthening the judiciary and encouraging the government to arrest and transfer remaining war crimes fugitives to the ICTY.

Part 3

U.S. assistance supports a variety of programs designed to advance judicial reform, improve governance by increasing the public's access to information, and build the capacity of prosecutors and law enforcement to investigate and prosecute war crimes and other complex crimes in accordance with international human rights standards. For example, U.S.-funded programs promote transparency in the courtroom by assisting the development of a mandatory system of ethics and discipline for judges and prosecutors. The United States supports work with justice system actors, the Public Information Commission, and a variety of NGOs to encourage use of and strengthen enforcement of the law on access to information. In addition, U.S. activities support legislative reform efforts important to the protection of human rights, including revisions to the new Criminal Procedure Code (CPC). U.S.-funded intensive training programs for police, prosecutors, and judges increase skills and improve procedures in areas such as cross-border war crime investigations and case inventory systems, witness protection and victim-witness support, prosecutor-led investigations and plea bargaining, use of special investigative techniques, and implementation of the new CPC.

The United States focuses on building the capacity of reform-oriented political parties to develop and communicate their message to constituents; to organize party caucuses within parliament; and to compete more effectively in local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. U.S. assistance programs provide training to democratic political parties on get-out-the-vote techniques, campaign communications, message development, more effective party governance, and strategies to achieve more inclusive political processes. These programs have also provided support for an array of election activities, including outreach by democratic parties, preelection tracking polls, and a parallel vote tabulation of the final results. U.S.-funded small grants also support NGOs working with youth and minority politicians with a view toward fostering interethnic dialogue and cooperation that is necessary to address the country's challenges.

U.S. public diplomacy and exchange programs also strengthen political and civil culture among professionals and youth. For example, U.S. citizens routinely visit the country as part of a speaker's program to exchange ideas on topics related to increasing civic participation and democratization. Regional outreach programs, which promote messages of ethnic tolerance and the value of diversity, include cross-border workshops and events with youth from Serbia and Kosovo. Youth exchanges to the United States of one month and one year in duration develop leadership skills in high school students. These exchanges also address issues important to the further development of the country's democracy: rule of law, youth activism, advocacy, and minority rights. U.S. funds also support the translation into Serbian and public dissemination of writings by American authors on international politics, conflict resolution, modern multiculturalism, and other democracy-related topics.

Part 4

The United States funds programs to improve the quality of news reporting; strengthen the financial, management, and production capacity of independent and minority broadcast, print, and electronic media outlets; and support production of programs on various reform issues, including EU integration and women's participation in public life. U.S.-supported training for journalists covers topics including media management, political reporting, domestic violence reporting, cultural reporting, and adherence to news standards. U.S.-funded small grants to independent media outlets support production of thematic television programs and articles; target journalism training, particularly in areas with significant minority populations; and develop youth departments within minority radio stations. Finally, U.S.-funded workshops bring together journalists of different ethnic backgrounds, including Serbs, Albanians, Bosniaks (Slavic Muslims), and Montenegrins, offering them an opportunity to collaborate and improve reporting on important developments such as the future of Kosovo.

The United States continues civic advocacy programs with NGOs to strengthen their advocacy, coalition building, and watchdog capabilities and to address citizen needs through education, advocacy, and provision of services. One U.S. program awards grants addressing a wide range of reform needs, including: decentralization, amendments to the law on free access to information, youth policy, media reform, and security sector reform. During election periods this program provides grant support to civil society organizations to increase voter participation and encourage citizen-led, issue-based efforts to inform political party agendas. Other U.S. programs support NGO efforts to improve local government transparency through monitoring, promote citizen participation in government across ethnic groups, and raise awareness about human rights issues in local communities.

U.S.-funded initiatives also promote respect for the rights of marginalized groups, including women, children, persons with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities. The United States continues to fund programs that assist refugees and persons displaced by the break-up of Yugoslavia and the subsequent conflicts of the 1990s. These programs provide displaced persons from Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina with legal and social assistance that facilitates their integration within--or

return to--Serbia. U.S. assistance supports efforts to help regional governments secure durable solutions for the vulnerable displaced populations within their borders. U.S.-funded small grants also encourage youth participation and activism in local communities, build the capacity of youth organizations and marginalized groups such as people with special needs, and intensify watchdog activities throughout the country.

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